Lost Heritage

WWII Battlegrounds in the Pacific

J. Steven Moore

As the 50th anniversary of numerous World War II events draws to a close within a year, *CRM* will be addressing a number of issues that confront managers of 20th-century war resources—issues such as land use planning, preservation, interpretation, and protection. In the following article, Steve Moore reflects on the preservation needs of World War II battle sites in the Pacific. In our next (December) issue, NPS planners Mary Franza and Ron Johnson analyze how differently and qualitatively various European nations have memorialized the 20th century wars, in their article entitled "The European Memory of 20th Century Wars." We welcome contributions of articles for this series. Please send manuscripts or topic ideas to the editor.

Guadalcanal. Tarawa. Saipan. Peleliu. Iwo Jima. To many people, these names have little or no meaning. But for other Americans, they speak of courage, heroism, and sacrifice. Fifty years ago, these islands and many others like them in the Pacific became battlegrounds, witnessing some of the most brutal fighting of World War II. Today, while most though not all of the wreckage of war has disappeared from their beaches and jungles, their significance to American history has not. They are hallowed by patriots' blood no less than Lexington, the Alamo, or Gettysburg.

That fact alone has not been enough to ensure their preservation. In fact, due to a variety of circumstances, virtually no effort has been made to preserve any of these battlefields or others like them in the Pacific as integral historical parks. Guam's War in the Pacific National Historical Park preserves tiny and incongruous parcels of that island, but to do the three-week-long campaign there justice would almost require setting aside half the 30-mile-long island—a physically unfeasible and politically impossible task. Outside Guam, only four other areas that witnessed fighting during World War II are under U.S. administration—Pearl Harbor, Wake Island, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. Pearl Harbor remains the headquarters for the U.S. Pacific Fleet and does attract 1-1/2 million visitors each year to the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial, and many Japanese tourists visit Saipan with its American Memorial Park in the Northern Mariana Islands. The other two areas are too remote and barren for almost anyone to bother even going there.

These are the exceptions. Most of the areas where American soldiers fought during World War II lie on foreign soil. For Pacific islanders—Micronesians and Melanesians—whose only role in the war was the involuntary use of their homes as battlegrounds, there is little interest in spending time and money preserving something that holds scant significance for them. After the war ended and the foreign soldiers left, they remained to clear away the debris, rebuild shattered homes, and get on with their lives. Tourism which could be used to justify setting aside some of these sites is not well developed in many Pacific island nations—distance being the most daunting factor to travelers—and would not, therefore, provide sufficient incentive, i.e., money, to preserve the sites. Those war relics that do remain—concrete bunkers, coastal guns, and abandoned landing craft—tend to be too large and heavy to be easily moveable or else are in marginal land-use areas where no one cares about them in the first place. Deliberate preservation in such instances is more the exception than the norm.

There is no shortage of islands that could qualify for historic preservation status in the Pacific. American forces conducted more than 50 amphibious operations during the war in the Pacific theater alone. Obviously, it would be impossible to tour the scene of all of these actions, at least all at once. When planning my own trip, I faced time and budget constraints and had to be selec-

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Some of the more than 1,000 U.S. Marines killed during the Battle of Tarawa, November 20-23, 1943.

Remains of American landing craft, foreground; and tank, Tarawa Atoll, 1993.

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tive. My itinerary came to include four major World War II battle sites— Pearl Harbor, Tarawa, Guam, and the Philippines. I abandoned plans to see Iwo Jima when told no regular flights serviced the island.

As the most accessible site from the U.S. mainland and as the location where the war began, Pearl Harbor was the logical starting point for my tour. Located on the south side of the island of Oahu, immediately west of the state capital, Honolulu, Pearl Harbor was first striking for its size. Perhaps because the name of the place stirs such large images, I expected something bigger, but compared to many other harbors in the United States, it is relatively small and contained. Nevertheless, approximately 90 vessels ranging from battleships to submarines were anchored there on December 7, 1941 . The attack left 18 of these sunk or badly damaged. Except for the battleships *Arizona, Oklahoma,* and *Utah,* all would be repaired and returned to service. A greater loss was suffered by the 2,403 soldiers, sailors, marines, and civilians killed and the more than 1,000 wounded, a considerable number under any circumstances, but especially considering the air raid lasted not quite two hours.

Pearl's blue water still affords shelter to gray naval vessels 50 years later, but now the most notable attraction is the white, curved profile of the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial. Dedicated in 1962, the Arizona Memorial straddles, but does not touch any part of the battleship whose forward powder magazine exploded a few minutes into the attack killing more than 1,000 members of her crew. Initial plans called for the removal of all the bodies on board, but following the deaths of two Navy divers who went below to remove them, it was decided to let them be. The forecastle of the ship was later removed, leaving only the hull which entombed the crew. Arizona remains where it sunk at its berth.

On the opposite side of Ford Island lies another less-famous victim of the attack, the U.S.S. *Utah.* It capsized after receiving two torpedo hits, trapping more than 50 men below decks. Still partially exposed above the surface, *Utah* is more visible than *Arizona,* but it is not possible to see the former when visiting the memorial. Instead, one must take a boat tour from Honolulu. Lasting about three hours, such narrated trips offer greater details on the attack and provide an opportunity to see other areas of the harbor and its surroundings not normally visible such as Hickam Field, the abandoned Naval Air Station on Ford Island, and Hospital Point where the U.S.S. *Nevada*—the only battleship to get underway during the attack—ran aground to avoid being sunk and blocking the entrance of the harbor. A memorial pier stands adjacent to *Utah* where every day an American flag is raised in memory of her crew.

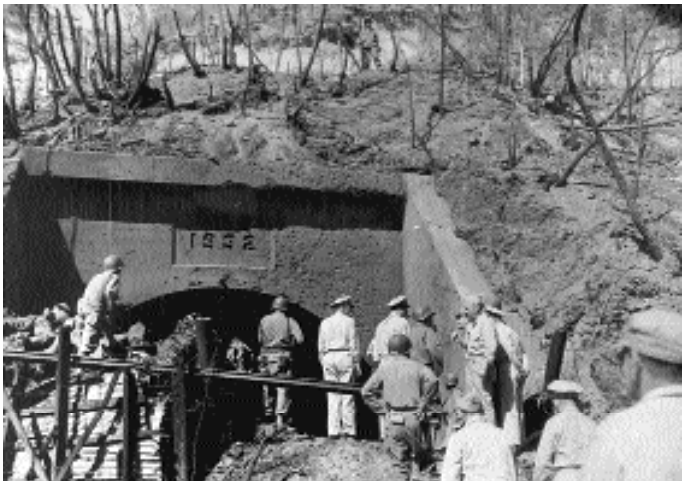
The air raid on Pearl Harbor coincided with other attacks in the Pacific, including among them the American possessions of Wake Island, Guam, and the Philippines, all of which were captured and occupied by the Japanese. U.S. strategy for recovering this territory and defeating Japan involved a two-prong thrust through both the central and southwest Pacific. Beginning in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, U.S. and Australian forces under General Douglas MacArthur first checked the Japanese advance and then began to push it back toward the Philippines. North of the equator in the central Pacific the Americans drove through the Gilbert, Marshall, Caroline, and Mariana island chains, bypassing many Japanese strongholds in a strategy called leapfrogging and leaving their isolated defenders to starve.

To be sure, not all the islands could be conveniently bypassed. Some had to be taken. One of these lay 2,500 miles southwest of Hawaii in the Gilbert Islands. Here on a little spit of sand and coral no longer than the distance between the U.S. Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial would be fought one of the fiercest battles in the Pacific. It's name: Tarawa.

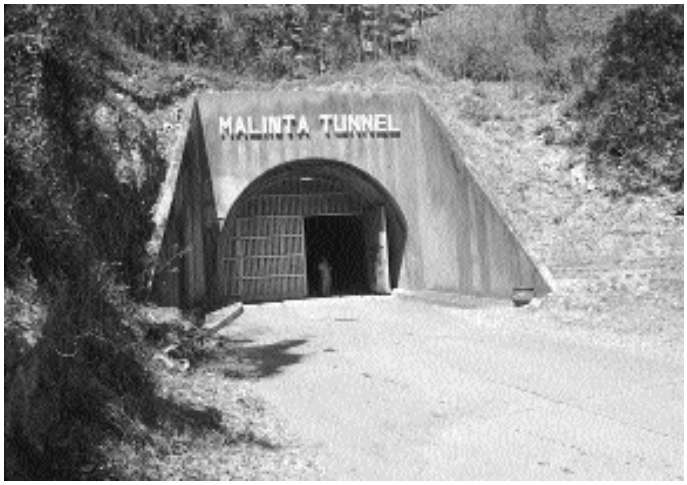
The Japanese occupied the Gilbert Islands in 1942 and began building air bases, threatening the Allied supply line to Australia and the southwest Pacific. To defend against amphibious assault, the Japanese built concrete bunkers and gun emplacements across the entire length of the island. Tarawa was so strongly fortified that the Japanese commander, Rear Admiral Keijo Shibasaki, boasted a million men could not capture it in 100 years. He had cause to feel confident, but his prediction fell short. It took fewer than 20,000 Marines three days to secure the island, but they paid a high price. More than 1,000 Americans died and another 2,000 suffered wounds. Japanese losses were even greater. Of the

One of the many Japanese bunkers that guarded Tarawa Atoll, seen after the battle, November 20-23, 1943.

Destroyed Japanese bunker, Tarawa Atoll, 1993.



General Douglas MacArthur and staff visit the Malinta Tunnel, Corregidor Island, after its recapture, February 1945.



The Malinta Tunnel, 1993.

approximately 4,500 Japanese soldiers on the island at the start of the battle, only 17 surrendered. Seventeen!

Much has changed on Tarawa since, and while it bears little resemblance to the fortress the Marines encountered, it retains some interesting relics of the battle. Tarawa has three large 8" coastal guns, captured from the British at Singapore. Located on the ocean side of the island, two still point toward the blue horizon in the direction the Japanese expected the Americans to attack. The third faces toward the lagoon in the direction they did attack. On the landing beaches, one may see the corroded hulls and treads of several shot up and abandoned landing craft and amphibious tractors used to transport troops as well as a tank lying half-buried in the sand a short distance from shore. Also along the beach are concrete obstacles intended to divert the Americans and their craft into prearranged firing zones. Concrete bunkers stand along other sections of beach, eternal sentinels facing an empty, brilliant blue ocean horizon.

Among Tarawa's more interesting sites is the concrete bunker used as the command post of Rear Admiral Shibasaki and his staff. Standing two stories high with walls 2'-3' thick, it is now overgrown with plants and filled with trash from the local inhabitants. Here, Shibasaki met his end. Several large shell holes on its side facing the lagoon tell why. It is a harrowing image of war's brutality.

The only effort made to preserve any of this involves two of the 8" coastal guns, painted and shored up with sandbag-like concrete. The actual Battle of Tarawa occurred on only one of the 40-mile-long atoll's islets, a place named Betio (pronounced BAY-she-o), now the most populous settlement on the island. It is an indication, if any were needed, that what writes large for American or Japanese history matters little to the people living there today. Most Civil War and even Revolutionary War battlefields in this country more closely resemble their appearance of 130 or 200 years ago than Tarawa does today. Standing in the quiet shade of the island's coconut trees, it was difficult to imagine the utter devastation evident in wartime photos showing Marines crouching as they dashed across a blasted landscape.

The Gilbert Islands where Tarawa is located became the staging area for the Americans' next objective: the Marshall Islands. I mention it now only briefly, because the flight to Guam landed at Kwajalein. Now a base for the U.S. Army, Kwajalein was captured in February 1944 after a week of intensive fighting that cost 373 American lives. That casualties remained comparatively low is testimony to the bitter lessons learned at Tarawa. Japanese losses on Kwajalein were no less, revealing the same stubborn willingness to fight to the last man. Only 35 men survived of the original force of 5,000. The scene of this ferocious combat is now virtually covered from one end of the island to the other by a concrete runway, flanked on either side by buildings and a narrow golf course.

Another 1,800 miles to the west in the Mariana Islands, Guam was captured by the Japanese in December 1941 with little opposition. It remained under their control for the next 32 months. American forces numbering 55,000 strong landed in July 1944 and liberated it after a three-week campaign that caused nearly 7,000 American casualties.

Unlike the other islands discussed in this article, Guam boasts a historical park to interpret this story as well as much of the rest of the Pacific war. The visitor center of War in the Pacific National Historical Park is located at Asan, one of two landing beaches used by the Americans in 1944. Guam has undergone many changes since then such as the construction of modern high-rise tourist hotels, but it remains possible to find relics of the past still hidden amidst these signs of progress. Concrete bunkers honeycomb rock outcroppings on the shoreline, their slit openings seeming to squint in the bright sunshine. Camouflaged to blend with the surroundings, some bunkers could almost be stepped on before one realized they were there. Artillery intended to blast landing craft from the water now overlooks beaches where sunbathers lay. Additionally, the national park encompasses parts of the invasion beaches as well as inland units containing Japanese coastal guns. Landing craft sunk during the invasion lie just off shore and may be explored by scuba divers. Live and spent rounds of ammunition may still be kicked up on the beaches.

More than Guam or any other island discussed in this article, the Philippines offered the best preserved historic

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sites, sometimes by circumstance, other times by design. The capital, Manila, was the scene of heavy fighting during its liberation in February 1945, rivaling in its intensity any in World War II. Large sections of Manila were laid waste and some of the worst atrocities of the war occurred when Japanese troops enraged by the apparent loyalty of the Filipinos to the Americans massacred approximately 100,000 civilians. Among allied capitals, only Warsaw suffered worse devastation.

Modern Manila rose from the ashes, erasing signs of the war, but for some few important landmarks. The Intramurous, a 16th-century Spanish fort, witnessed some of the bloodiest fighting. Japanese soldiers made their final stand in the city behind its thick stone walls and had to be blasted out at point-blank range. It suffered severe damage, now repaired, but it is still possible to appreciate some of the difficulties the Americans faced by walking along the fort's walls. Across the city's main boulevard from the Intramurous is the Manila Hotel, MacArthur's residence before the war. The MacArthur suite, a six-room penthouse overlooking Manila Bay, has been preserved in honor of the man who made the Philippines his home for six years before the war and is available for use by hotel guests. Also in the city is Santo Tomas University. Converted to a prison during the war, it held 3,700 American civilians stranded in the Philippines following Pearl Harbor. Still standing on the campus are two buildings that housed the American internees during their three years of captivity. A small plaque on the entrance commemorates their suffering.

The American Cemetery and Memorial, Manila, The Philippines, 1993.

Some of the men who died to set these and other people free now rest at the American Cemetery and Memorial. It is as impressive and moving as any national cemetery in this country. The memorial lists the names of 36,280 American and Filipino soldiers killed during the war whose bodies were never recovered and features 25 large colored mosaics, providing detailed descriptions of all the battles and campaigns in the Pacific. Surrounding the memorial are more than 17,000 graves, bearing silent testimony to the war's legacy.

Of all the sites I visited in the Pacific, Corregidor was the best preserved. The Philippines has preserved it as a historic site and actively promotes it as a tourist attraction. To that extent, the Filipinos are the exception to the rule that the Pacific war bears little significance to anyone other than the major combatants. This is due to their own direct participation in the fighting and to some degree to their lasting gratitude to the Americans.

On Corregidor, the Americans and Filipinos remained defiant for five months following Pearl Harbor, long after Japanese forces had swept victoriously through the rest of the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. Lying 30 miles from the city at the entrance of Manila Bay, the tiny tadpole-shaped island guarded the entrance into the harbor. First fortified by the Spanish, it was later strengthened by the Americans who added batteries of 12" mortars capable of lobbing 900-pound shells through the lightly-armored decks of ships trying to enter the harbor.

Visitors to Corregidor land at the North Dock, within sight of a crumbling concrete pier used by General Douglas MacArthur to board a PT boat in March 1942 prior to his escape to Australia. Guided tours take visitors around the island in trolleys that make frequent stops at several of the more important sites. Among the areas visited are a Japanese anti-aircraft battery, four of the nearly two dozen American batteries on the island some of which still show evidence of direct bomb hits, Topside Barracks and parade ground, and the Malinta Tunnel. A light and sound tour of the Malinta Tunnel details its history and the conditions endured by the defenders during the siege.

Although Corregidor's guns were intended for use against ships, they proved as effective against land targets as well. Following the American-Filipino retreat into the Bataan Peninsula, Corregidor's defenders aimed their artillery northward and lobbed huge explosive shells into the Japanese positions. Located just across the entrance to Manila Bay, Bataan's mountainous profile looms forebodingly over Corregidor.

In contrast to the highly-popular tours on Corregidor, Bataan is an unlikely destination for most travelers, even Filipinos. My guide said that he had not been there in some years—a confession illustrated when we became lost at one point. Despite its proximity to Manila, Bataan remains rural and isolated. It took three hours to reach by car, a result of poor roads and heavy traffic that can make American traffic jams pale by comparison. Lacking much development, Bataan has a tranquil, if dusty appearance. With the din of war having long since receded from the slopes of its volcanoes, little activity of any kind occurs to disturb the stillness of its drowsy heat.

Bataan's name is synonymous not only with the stubborn, futile defense of the peninsula, but also with the infamous Death March that immediately followed its surrender. Some 70,000 American and Filipino soldiers made the trek, covering about 60 miles by foot and another 30 by train, to their prison at Camp O'Donnell. They endured the intense heat of the dry season without adequate food, water, or rest. Of those that started out, between 7,000 and 10,000 never made it.

Today, the route of the Death March can still be retraced. In the towns of both Mariveles, at Bataan's southern tip, and Bagac, located along its western coast, zero-kilometer markers designate the beginning of the ordeal and other mileposts along the way mark the route.

General Douglas MacArthur fulfills his promise to return to The Philippines, October 1944.

A memorial on Leyte Island commemorates MacArthur's return, 1993.

The only official memorial to the defenders of Bataan is located at Mt. Samat, near the center of the second American-Filipino defense line. A large cross, 311' high, dominates the height. An elevator permits a view from the top when it is working.

My final excursion outside Manila took me to the island of Leyte. It was here that the first American landings in the Philippines occurred. Two-and-a-half years after the American flag had last flown in the Philippines, soldiers of the Army's 96th Infantry Division raised it for the first time on Hill 120. Less than an hour had elapsed since the first troops of a force comprising 165,000 soldiers splashed ashore on the island's black sand beaches. As I climbed the steep stairs that permit access to the top of Hill 120 today, sweat drenched my clothing and I wondered how anyone could make the ascent under fire. A tacky-looking memorial, consisting of a van-size replica of an Army helmet, reminiscent of something one might see at a miniature golf course, marked the crest. This did not detract from the view I enjoyed which revealed an unbroken emerald green canopy of coconut trees in all directions.

Besides being the first Philippine soil liberated by the Americans, Leyte became notable for another reason. It provided one of the most memorable photos taken during the war. About four hours after the first landings, MacArthur literally fulfilled his promise to return to the Philippines when he too waded ashore. The photograph shows MacArthur striding confidently through the surf toward the beach with his retinue of aids in tow. What is now forgotten is that had MacArthur had his way, he would never have gotten his trouser cuffs damp. Plans were for him to land at a dock, most of which had been destroyed during the pre-invasion bombardment. Some few remained, but no one had time to show MacArthur's party where they were. Still 50 yards off shore, MacArthur's landing craft ran aground. Impatient and annoyed with the delay, MacArthur ordered the vessel's ramp lowered, stepped knee deep into the water, and strode toward the beach. The photograph of the incident created the impression in many peoples' minds of a resolute, forceful commander, which MacArthur certainly was. Nevertheless, his fierce expression at that particular moment owed more to his irritation than to anything else. When MacArthur saw the picture, he realized its public relations value and repeated the performance at another beach the following day.

While it might be said about others, the Filipinos have not forgotten the whole episode. Today, a somewhat weathered, but still effective memorial stands near the spot of the first landing. It shows the confident if stiff figure of MacArthur surrounded by Philippine President Osmena and military aides standing shin-deep in a pool of water. It captures the spirit, if not the drama of the event.

About five miles to the north, Leyte's capital city, Tacloban, became MacArthur's headquarters during the ensuing battle for Leyte. The Price House where he stayed has been preserved as a memorial. Throughout the Leyte campaign, Tacloban experienced frequent air raids, with Japanese pilots—who knew MacArthur's location—showing a marked determination to try to kill him. Though they managed to strafe the Price House, and killed several people living on either side of it, they succeeded in doing nothing more than knocking the plaster off some of the walls in the headquarters building itself. Damage to a wall in the house may still be seen.

The setting for this history is a lush tropical paradise. Leyte retains its beaches, unsullied by crowds or high-rise hotels. Coconut trees grow right to the shoreline providing cool shade from the equatorial sun. It is pure isolation. In this peaceful setting, it is hard to image the quiet disturbed by the din of war, that here as on hundreds of similar beaches and jungles across the Pacific men fought and died. Nature has healed the wounds with time filling in the craters and washing away the blood and debris. What remains are a few markers and monuments, the shattered remains of concrete bunkers, the veterans, dwindling in numbers with each passing year, and the memories.

J. Steven Moore is a park ranger on the National Mall, National Capital Parks-Central in Washington, DC. His article was the outgrowth of a 3-1/2 week vacation to the Pacific for the sole purpose of exploring World War II battlegrounds.

Historic photos courtesy the National Archives.
Contemporary photos by the author.